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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000721

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM BG
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH MILITARY INTELLIGENCE ACTIVE BUT NOT
VERY ADEPT AT POLITICS

REF: DHAKA 0692

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) remains involved in domestic politics, bullying some politicians and plotting behind the scenes with others to advance its agenda. In recent days, senior politicians have told Post how leaders of the intelligence group have privately outlined plans to try to ensure the next Parliament acts in accordance with the military's wishes. One prominent lawyer for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party described recent DGFI threats against him for actions it deemed inimical to its political goals. The DGFI's use of heavy-handed tactics, from encouraging a bitter factional rift within a major political party to alleged physical abuse of the detained son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, have hardly been effective and there is little reason to believe subsequent efforts will achieve success. Still, continued interference could complicate Caretaker Government efforts to return Bangladesh to democracy by raising questions about the credibility of the upcoming elections.

AN UNIMPRESSIVE RECORD IN POLITICS

¶12. (C) DGFI is the much-feared military intelligence force that has been active in domestic politics since the Caretaker Government (CTG) came to power in January 2007 with the strong support of Chief of Army Staff Gen. Moeen Uddin Ahmed. The CTG seeks a return to democracy this year and an end to the endemic political violence and graft that have plagued the country. (Note: General Moeen restated these goals during a meeting with Ambassador Moriarty on June 26 (reftel).) Regime leaders also want to ensure vengeance is not pursued against them by politicians who have been targeted in a sweeping anti-graft campaign. In pursuit of those goals, DGFI has played a key role in trying to remove from politics two former prime ministers, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia, who it views as responsible for the country's endemic political violence and graft. It has supported reformist factions in those two parties opposed to the former prime ministers and has helped create new parties that back the Caretaker Government's agenda. The DGFI also has tried to shape media coverage of politics to its liking by intimidating journalists and by controlling editorial content. In one sign of how fearful many Bangladeshis are of the DGFI, they often refuse to mention its name even in

private conversation, instead referring to it as "the powers that be" or "the invisible force."

¶13. (S) Still, the DGFI's political record to date is not good. Its "minus-two" policy of attempting to sideline the two former prime ministers by sending them into exile abroad or destroying them politically at home has failed. Both women remain firmly at the helm of their parties despite multiple corruption charges. DGFI support for an anti-Khaleda Zia faction of the BNP has been a bust, at least in part because the intelligence agency's fingerprints in orchestrating the intraparty split were so obvious. Meanwhile, two new political parties supported by DGFI have failed to generate popular enthusiasm. And the alleged physical abuse of Khaleda Zia's son, Tarique Rahman, while in DGFI custody has managed to create sympathy for him despite his reputation for gross corruption and ruthlessness.

MORE POLITICAL MACHINATIONS AND MORE THREATS

¶14. (S) Two prominent BNP reformists told PolOff June 23 about a meeting a few days earlier at which three senior DGFI officials insisted the military needed to exercise control over the government for three years to ensure political reforms stuck. The reformists -- former Health Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf and his brother, former Parliament member Choudhury Akmal Ibne Yusuf (protect) -- met with DGFI Director General Maj. Gen. Golam Mohammad and Brig. Gen. ATM Amin, director of counterterrorism. According to the

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brothers' account, the DGFI leaders said Parliamentary elections would definitely be held in December and they wanted to ensure a majority of elected members support the CTG's agenda. The DGFI leaders said it therefore was important for BNP reformists to compete in the election even if the mainstream Khaleda Zia loyalists called for a boycott. The DGFI said it would ensure victory for the reformists and likeminded candidates.

¶15. (S) One brother said he had recently received a phone call from Brig. Gen. Amin's cousin asking for names of such prospective candidates. Other politicians from both the BNP and Awami League -- including former Awami League Parliamentary Whip Md. Abdus Shahid (protect), for example -- have told Post they had received similar enquiries from the DGFI. (Note: There is widespread speculation about tactics the DGFI could use to manipulate the election. These include providing resources to favored candidates and threatening with arrest those it does not want to see run. Gen. Moeen during his meeting with the Ambassador strongly denied there would be any such manipulation. End note.)

¶16. (S) Meanwhile, lawyer Muhammad Nawshad Zamir (protect), who represents Khaleda Zia and Tarique Rahman in their graft cases, told PolOff June 25 he had been threatened a day earlier by the DGFI. According to Nawshad, he had been summoned to meet a DGFI acquaintance who passed on a demand from Brig. Gen. Amin to end public comments in support of Tarique Rahman or face possible arrest by National Security Intelligence. Nawshad also said a top-level DGFI delegation June 24 had visited his father, the Speaker of Parliament, and said the Speaker would not succeed the President as head of state even though he was next in line under the Constitution. The meeting came amid reports that the President's frail health was failing. (Note: Media reports have since said the President's health had improved. End note.)

MIXED SIGNALS: WHAT IS THE DGFI GAME PLAN?

¶17. (S) Despite signs that DGFI machinations have not ceased,

there also is evidence that the DGFI recently has deferred to the civilian advisers in the Caretaker Government Cabinet on key political decisions. The civilian advisers appear to have taken the lead in negotiating the parole of Sheikh Hasina, who also is facing graft charges, to go abroad for medical treatment. The civilian advisers also have voiced willingness to free Khaleda Zia. Some politicians believe discord exists within the DGFI itself over the fate of Tarique Rahman, who is seeking urgent medical care abroad, and over whether reunification of the BNP should be encouraged. The transfer out of DGFI headquarters of its politically active Director for Counter Intelligence, Brigadier General Fazlul Bari Chowdhury, may be an acknowledgement of DGFI's political failures and a sign that the intelligence group may adopt a lower profile. More importantly, complaints from senior military officers recently led General Moeen to order the transfer out of DGFI of two lieutenant colonels close to Amin who were intimately involved in the political machinations and also accused of corruption. This indicates General Moeen will reign in DGFI when its activities threaten to sully the military and derail the reforms he advocates.

COMMENT: COERCIVE MEDDLING WON'T BOOST REFORM PROSPECTS

18. (S) Post strongly supports the Caretaker Government's goals of returning to democracy this year and of establishing reforms to fight systemic corruption and political violence. We believe, however, that the legitimacy of reforms will be weakened unless the Parliamentary elections are widely viewed as fair and credible and free of manipulation. Even though there is no reason to believe that DGFI efforts to manipulate the outcome of the Parliament elections will be any more successful than its earlier political scheming, such activity could provide an excuse for the losing political party to question the credibility of the vote. (Note: The Ambassador forcefully underscored this point during a July 2 meeting with Home Affairs Adviser Gen. (ret.) M.A. Matin. End note.) While we will continue to foster a strong and mutually beneficial working relationship with DGFI on counterterrorism, we also will urge it to forgo political

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intimidation and electoral manipulation that could undercut the reforms needed to improve Bangladesh's horrendous governance.

Moriarty